

Syrian troops in Tripoli: taming Lebanon or risking costly embroilment?

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Nicosia, Cyprus

The deployment of Syrian troops in the battered north Lebanese port city of Tripoli yesterday marks the latest step in Syria's campaign to bring its turbulent neighbor under control.

But observers are divided over whether this means the Syrians are finally succeeding in taming Lebanon — or whether they may be risking another dangerous and sapping embroilment.

The use of Syrian troops to keep the peace will be watched closely in Beirut, where clashes have continued despite the Aug. 22 cease-fire sponsored by Syria. If successful, the Tripoli formula could encourage the Syrians to step in militarily to end the anarchy prevailing in Beirut.

Despite the Tripoli accord, there is still no sign of the three surviving Soviet Embassy personnel abducted last week by the so-called Islamic Liberation Organization, which murdered a fourth Soviet diplomat.

The group was demanding that the Soviets pressure their ally Syria to stop the Tripoli battles. Over the weekend, the USSR evacuated 60 Soviet citizens from Beirut. There was also no sign Sunday of kidnapped US diplomat William Buckley. Last Thursday his abductors claimed they had killed him in reprisal for the Israeli air strike on Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunisia last Tuesday. Observers were puzzled that the abductors would kill Mr. Buckley because of the attack on the PLO. The Islamic Jihad, which claimed responsibility for Buckley's abduction in March 1984, is fiercely anti-American, and the PLO is currently trying to engage a political dialogue with Washington.

One explanation was provided by NBC News, which quoted intelligence sources this weekend as saying they believed Buckley had died under torture two months ago, and that the raid on the PLO provided a convenient pretext for announcing his death.

[Meanwhile, the US Embassy in Beirut said Sunday it was investigating reports that an American who vanished in Lebanon last month might have been kidnapped. Reuters reports. Steven James Donahue disappeared while doing research for a book on narcotics smuggling.]

The Syrian deployment in Tripoli was part of a cease-fire accord announced late Thursday night in the Syrian capital of Damascus. The truce ended nearly three weeks of increasingly violent battles between pro- and anti-Syrian militias.

Syria's previous efforts to control Lebanese cities have not been felicitous. Syrian troops entered Beirut in 1976 but found themselves locked in a violent and inconclusive confrontation with the Christian eastern half of the city two years later. In west Beirut, they became the targets of car-bomb and other attacks, and were finally squeezed out by the Israeli siege in August 1982.

In Tripoli, the new phase of Syrian pacification efforts follows a series of intra-Lebanese battles that have made it seem as though only the Syrians are capable of saving Lebanon. Syria has been presiding over a series of meetings between the Christian, Druze, and Shiite Muslim militias aimed at reaching a common conception of Lebanon's future.

The Tripoli cease-fire accord had behind it the authority of Syrian President Hafez Assad, who held separate talks with the warring Tripoli factions — the fundamentalist Sunni Muslim Tawheed Islami ("Islamic Unification") movement and the coalition of Syrian-backed Lebanese parties which had been trying to dislodge the Tawheed from the city.

The accord puts Syria in charge of security in Tripoli, although the Lebanese Army and police will also play a part in controlling the city. Under the accord, all security operations are to be the responsibility of a new security operations office, headed by the commander of Syrian forces in north Lebanon. The agreement calls for all the warring militias to hand in all their heavy and medium-caliber weaponry to the Syrians. Small arms are to be collected and stored by the militias themselves in their own depots, subject to inspection by the operations office.

Agreeing to give up their arms and to yield control of Tripoli represented a major climb-down by the Tawheed fundamentalists, who had driven out the rival secular factions two years ago. In negotiations a week after the fighting began Sept. 15, they refused to hand in their weapons. The Syrian military delegation that was leading the negotiations called off its mediation and gave the green light for a four-pronged assault on the city by allied militias operating out of Syrian-controlled territory around Tripoli.

With the Syrian-backed militias inching their way forward into the city, the Tawheed fighters faced slow annihilation. But Iran, which has close relations with the Tripoli fundamentalists, stepped in to avert their destruction.

An Iranian delegation escorted the Tawheed leader, Sheikh Saeed Shaaban, to Damascus for the talks that produced the cease-fire accord.

The truce has basically worked so far. On Saturday, a Red Cross team was able to get into the city for the first time in a week and discovered massive destruction and appalling conditions. Local hospitals were crammed with casualties, while in some areas bodies were still strewn amid the rubble in the streets. As many as 500 people are estimated to have died, with well over 1,000 wounded. Up to half a million of the city's 700,000 inhabitants were believed to have fled before the worst of the battles began.

"After a battering like that, it's hardly surprising that Tripoli would accept peace at any price," said one observer. "But wait till they've got their breath back."